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The Dead

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The Scared Kid

When the video is posted on YouTube it's an instant hit. Within days everyone's talking about it.

'Have you seen the "Scared Kid" video?'

'It's really freaky.'

'At first I thought it was a joke, but it looks so real.'

'It's definitely fake, but it's still scary.'

'I can't watch it. It's too frightening.'

'Who is he? Do you know who he is? Who's the Scared Kid?'

'Nobody knows . . .'

Maybe it's a clever trailer for a new horror film? Maybe it's a viral ad for something. A new car or a chocolate bar? Or just maybe it's real . . .

There's something about it. Something about the kid. No ten-year-old is that good an actor. And if someone's playing a trick on him they are *really* sick and they've done way too good a job. Who would do that? Who would deliberately scare a young kid that much? And why has nobody come forward to explain it all?

Even after everything that happens, when the whole world changes forever, when everyone knows that the video wasn't a hoax, but the start of something terrible, people will remember the Scared Kid. His poor frightened little face.

It's like the last thing everyone saw before the lights went out.

He sits there at his computer talking into a web cam. It's clear he's been crying for ages, his eyes are red raw, his face streaked with tears. He's shaking uncontrollably and his teeth are actually chattering. You can hear them. It would be funny if it wasn't so weird. He can hardly get his words out. They tumble over each other.

'I don't know what to what to do I don't know they've killed Danny and Eve they killed Danny and Eve Danny and and Eve and Eve and and . . . they're outside now I can see them I can see them outside there are three mothers and a father . . .'

That's the freakiest bit, the bit that sticks in people's minds, that he calls them mothers and fathers.

'They came to the house and they killed they killed Danny and Eve there's blood omigod – omigod there's blood three mothers and a father they've killed Danny and Eve make them go away please make them go away . . .'

Then he picks up the web cam and turns it to point out of the window. It veers all over, lights smearing the screen. Now you can see the street. It's night-time. The picture's awful but you can just see these four people under the street lights – *three mothers and a father* – three women and a man, and near to them what looks like a dead body. The body of a child.

There's something not right about the people. They don't look like actors. The way they're standing. And when one of them looks up at the camera it's the most awful thing . . . a dead-eyed look, like an animal. Are they actors? The picture's so bad it's hard to tell.

Then the Scared Kid's voice again.

'Can you see them? They've gone crazy – three mothers and a father – they've been trying to get back in into the house but Danny and Eve they're dead they're dead and I don't know where my mum and dad are there's nobody else here they've all gone it's only me . . .'

The camera moves again. You can hear crashing and smashing in the background. Shouting. Now the kid's back at his desk, staring into the lens, like he's staring into the grave. Even more terrified than before. Shaking. Shaking.

'I'm going to post the video – Danny showed me how – they killed him three mothers and a father I have to do it quickly I don't know what's happening I don't think anyone will help me I think I'm going to die like like . . .'

And that's the end of it.

Some other kids do impressions of him, and post them. There's a remix of the kid done to a death metal soundtrack. But the thing is – the video is scary because it seems so real. People watch it over and over, trying to understand it. And when adults start dying, when it becomes clear that some terrible new disease is striking everybody over the age of fourteen, the Scared Kid begins to look like some kind of prophet.

Within a very short time 'Scared Kid' becomes the most watched YouTube clip ever. After a month it's taken down. There's a message saying it's been removed. The day after that the whole YouTube site is taken down without any explanation.

And the day after that the Internet stops working.

It just disappears.

That's when people finally realize that something serious is happening.

THE ACTION IN THIS BOOK BEGINS JUST OVER A YEAR BEFORE THE INCIDENTS DESCRIBED IN *THE ENEMY*.

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Mr Hewitt was crawling through the broken window. Sliding over the ledge on his belly. Hands groping at the air, fingers clenching and unclenching, arms waving as if he was trying to swim breaststroke. In the half-light Jack could just make out the look on his pale yellowing face. A stupid look. No longer human. Eyes wide and staring. Tears of blood dribbling from under his eyelids. Tongue lolling out from between cracked and swollen lips. Skin covered with boils and sores.

Jack stood there frozen, the cricket bat held tight in sweating hands. He knew he should step forward and whack Mr Hewitt as hard as he could in the head, but his right arm ached all the way down. He'd been swinging the bat all night and the last teacher he'd hit had jarred his shoulder. Now it hurt just to hold the bat, which felt like a lead weight in his hands.

He knew that wasn't the real reason, though. When it came down to it, he couldn't bring himself to hit Mr Hewitt. He'd always liked him. He'd been Jack's English teacher for the last year. He was one of the youngest and most popular teachers in the school, always talking to the boys about films and TV and console games, not in a creepy way, not to get in with the kids, simply because he was genuinely interested in the same things that they were. When the disease hit,

when everything started to go wrong, Mr Hewitt had done everything he could to help the boys. Trying to contact parents and make arrangements, keeping their spirits up, comforting them, reassuring them, always searching for food and water, making the buildings safe . . .

And when it had got really bad, when those adults who'd got sick but hadn't died had started to turn on the kids, attacking them like wild animals, Mr Hewitt had helped fight them off.

He'd been tireless and it had looked like he might escape the sickness.

He'd been a hero.

And now here he was, crawling slowly, slowly, slowly into the lower common room like some huge clumsy lizard. He raised his head, stretching his neck, and wheezed at Jack, bloody saliva bubbling between his teeth. Jack could see two more teachers behind him, attempting in their own mindless way to get to the window.

Jack swallowed. It hurt his throat. He hadn't had anything to drink all day. They were running low on water and trying to ration it. His head throbbed. This was the second night the teachers had attacked in force. Jack's second night without sleep. The stress and the tiredness were turning him slightly crazy. His heart felt all fluttery and he was constantly on the edge of losing it, breaking down into uncontrollable sobbing, or laughter, or both. He was seeing things everywhere, out of the corner of his eye, shapes moving in the shadows. He would shout a warning and turn to look and there would be nothing there.

Mr Hewitt was real, though, something out of a waking nightmare, slithering in, inch by inch.

The last hour had been a chaotic panicked scramble of

running around in the dark from room to room, checking doors, windows, battering back any teachers that got past the defences. And then they'd heard breaking glass in the lower common room, and he and Ed had come charging in to see what was happening.

And there was Mr Hewitt.

Jack couldn't do this alone. He looked for Ed and saw him crouched down behind an overturned table, his grey face poking over the top, eyes white-rimmed and staring. Ed, his best mate. Ed who everyone thought was cool. Clever without being cocky or a suck-up. Good-looking Ed who all the girls went for. Ed who beat him at tennis without really trying. Jack had always felt second in line to him, even though the two of them did everything together, hung out all the time, shared books and comics and music, played on the same football team, the same cricket team.

Last year the school had produced a glossy booklet advertising itself to new parents, and there on the front cover was Ed – the boy most likely to succeed. The happy, smiling, confident face of Rowhurst.

Well, this was the new face of the school, hiding behind a table, scared halfway to death, while the teachers crawled in through a broken window.

Ed reminded Jack of someone.

The Scared Kid.

Ed was totally bricking it, and his fear was making him next to useless.

'Help me,' Jack croaked.

'I'm keeping watch,' said Ed, a slight catch in his voice.

Yeah, right, keeping watch . . . Keeping safe more like.

Jack sighed. His own tiredness and fear were turning him bitter.

'If you won't help,' he said, 'at least go and get one of the others.'

Ed shook his head. 'I'm staying with you.'

'Then do something,' Jack shouted. 'Hewitt's nearly through. I need help here.'

'What . . .? What do you want me to do?'

Jack rubbed his shoulder. He'd had enough of the school. He'd had enough of this mess, night after night, the same bloody ritual. Right now he'd rather be anywhere else than here.

Most of all he wanted to be at home, though. Back in his own house, in his own room, with his own things. Under his duvet, with the world shut out.

Home . . .

He tossed the bat to Ed. It bounced off the table and ended up on the carpet.

'Hit him, Ed,' he said.

'I'm not sure I can,' Ed replied.

'Pick up the bat and hit him.' Jack felt tears come into his eyes and he squeezed them tight then pinched the wetness away.

'Please, Ed, just hit him.'

'And then what?' Ed asked. 'They just keep coming, Jack. We can't kill them all.'

'Hit him, Ed! For God's sake, just hit him!'